

February 5, 2024

My name is Mary McNeish Stengel and I am a licensed clinical social worker who has worked for the court as an employee and a contractor for 15 years and as a clinician and consultant with a trauma-based clientele for 40 years. I am here to speak to you today in opposition to House Bill 405. I have been honored and privileged to work for Circuit Courts in multiple jurisdictions in Maryland to complete child custody evaluations as both a court employee and as a court contractor. I managed the Family Services Office in Baltimore County for several years and now, with a colleague from Montgomery County, voluntarily run a mentoring group for court evaluators around the state. I am in a unique position to speak to you about the experience of custody evaluations from several perspectives.

I am impressed with the dedication the supporters of this bill have to the welfare of children and families in high conflict child custody cases. In many jurisdictions evaluations are ordered in cases where the parties have no counsel and the court needs a neutral picture of what is happening in the family. The average evaluation takes 40 hours to complete. We are required by Rule 9-205.3 to interview both parents and their partners, interview all the children, observe the parents with all the children and observe the families in their home environments. We are also responsible for interviewing and observing other family members who live in the home, but are not parties to the case. We review academic and attendance records of the children, medical, dental, and mental health records, when allowed, of the children, Child Protective Services records, and police records as well as the entire court file. We review similar records for the parents in the case. We are also required to speak to collateral contacts provided by the parents, as well as any others we feel would be helpful. We then have to write a report incorporating all the information collected and have it completed usually within 30-45 days of starting the case. We put our personal safety at risk by going into the homes of families who are understandably hostile about us being in their homes and intruding into their private matters. In many courts an evaluator starting salary is \$65,000.00. As a court contractor typically get paid \$2000.00-\$3000.00 per case.

What we do not do, based on my experience and knowledge of work being done around the state, is our own investigations into cases in which abuse or neglect has been identified. We are mandated to report abuse and neglect to the local Department of Social Services, who have the expertise and the mandate to investigate these cases and reach a conclusion. If sexual abuse is alleged, no matter how long ago it occurred, we are mandated to report it.

We do not do this work as untrained professionals. All mental health professionals require a masters or doctoral degree and licensure to practice. In addition to the Maryland Rule requirements for training which I believe the AOC has given you, we enter the field with years of classroom training and clinical rotations, as well as the training we require to renew our licenses, which for social workers is 40 hours every two years. This training is typically taken in child custody related topics, which keeps us current in applications of the latest research and practice in the field.

This work is not for the faint of heart. I have yet to meet a court evaluator who is doing it for the glamor and the glory it involves. Rather it is done with a deep sense of the responsibility and commitment to the welfare of the children and families we serve.

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